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ABSTRACT

Personal reflection on the role of college or university presidents and how their professional academic preparation influences how they accomplish things is presented. Evidence of the sociological imagination is noted. A review of how others have viewed their positions as president is included. In a recent summary, findings on the college president's role from 350 interviews at 32 institutions shows presidents use different kinds of power (i.e. reward, coercive, leverage) to influence the attainment of goals. In exercising this power, presidents seemed to frame their position and style of leadership in one or more ways such as bureaucratic, collegial, political, or symbolic. The personal reflection is that these categories are too neat, and the president's role is one responsible for sustaining an institutional vision and for maintaining and enhancing the environment for teaching and learning. The institution has the dual mission as a campus in service to people and as a college, social organization, and part of society. How this view is influenced by the study of sociology and anthropology is noted. The "personal troubles of milieu" and the "public issues of structure" are discussed. It is concluded that "the sociological imagination" has influenced the following: the conception of the institution as a campus and a college; a concern for organizational structures supporting individual aspirations; attention to explication and interpretation as a means of illuminating reality; and a belief that effective communication requires an understanding of mutual expectations and context. Contains 4 references. (SM)

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"The President as Sociologist as President"

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Introduction

What does a college or university president do? How does his or her professional academic preparation influence how he does what he does? In my case, how is the "sociological imagination" evident? While I will review how some others have viewed their position as presidents, most of what I report is based on personal reflection.

How Some Presidents View Their Role

There are many books by retired college and university presidents about the lives they have led, but not many which offer the kind of reflection assumed by this assignment. There are studies of presidential style and leadership, but even they often fail to draw connections between personal scholarship and decision-making. Nevertheless, they do report on leadership style, and it is useful to think about these categories as possibly reflecting earlier academic training and experience.

In a recent summary, Bob Birnbaum and others at Teachers College of Columbia University report their findings based on a study of the college president's role as explored in 350 interviews at 32 institutions (Birnbaum, et al). They report that presidents use different kinds of power (the power of the office, reward power, coercive power, the power of expertise, and the power of leverage by using third parties) to influence the attainment of goals. In exercising these various forms of power, the presidents in this study actually seemed to frame their position and style of leadership in one or more of several ways. These different possibilities include the "bureaucratic", which emphasizes systems of management for decision-making; the "collegial", which emphasizes participative, democratic decision-making, interpersonal skills, and meeting human needs; the "political", which views conflict as a central feature of organizational life and the president as diplomat and mediator, with decisions a result of coalition building and bargaining; and the "symbolic", which emphasizes that organizations are cultural systems of shared meanings and beliefs. In this latter view, which has been popular in the business press in recent years, the president is a facilitator who emphasizes expressive rather than instrumental actions.

Where am I?

So much for others, what about me? I think these categories are too neat. I view the president's role as one responsible for sustaining an institutional vision and for maintaining and enhancing the environment for teaching and learning. In my view, "sustaining an institutional vision" means telling and retelling the institutional story or mission, and repeating the principles which guide its direction to every audience possible, including faculty, students, staff, trustees, alumni, community and state leaders, corporate and individual patrons, etc. It is through this telling and retelling,

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using examples of student and faculty accomplishments and institutional recognition from third parties, that the "story" of a college becomes known generally and its vision becomes part of the campus vocabulary.

"Maintaining and enhancing" involves not only funding, but also enriched opportunities for faculty and students both on and off campus. Some of these opportunities for enrichment, growth and change result from partnerships with other institutions, schools, communities, and corporations.

My reference to "environment" suggests that I view the campus as a community, as a system. Systems must be maintained and nurtured by adding nutrients and by using myth, symbol, and ritual to accent and promote values and to preserve the heritage of the community, even as it changes to meet new challenges.

This campus-community system is actually very complicated because each institution has two roles that can be in conflict. First, each institution has a mission as a campus, i.e., as a center for teaching and scholarship apart from society, but contributing to it. The campus both preserves traditions and creates new knowledge. It is related to people and their artifacts as well as to their futures. It both preserves and prepares.

Second, collegiate institutions are also colleges, social organizations among other social organizations, a part of society that must be understood in terms of the great themes of the social sciences, the arts, and the humanities - community, authority, status, the sacred, and alienation.

Colleges are unique institutions in this way. They are apart from and a part of. They are at the periphery, the cutting edge in terms of science and technology, analysis and interpretation, as well as creation of new knowledge and challenge to the status quo.

Yet they are also at the center of things, playing an instrumental role in helping society evolve from one era to another. Through the interpretation and reinterpretation of what we know, they become a source of wisdom.

This dual mission as campus in service to people and as institution vis a vis other social institutions need not lead to deadlock. Both parts inform the other so that when we stand in the center we are informed by what we have observed from the edge; and when we look in from the margin, we have a better understanding of life at the center.

We need to be at the center of things, and to preserve the past and prepare our students for the future. But we also need the experience of being at the edge, of hearing a different drummer, to fuel the flames of creativity and innovation, and to express a new vision of the future.

How My View is Influenced by the Study of Sociology and Anthropology

The view just expressed may sound familiar to those who have read C. Wright Mills', The Sociological Imagination. In it, he talks about the function of sociology in distinguishing between "the personal troubles of milieu" and the "public issues of structure."

One might also find a parallel with Robert Nisbet's metaphors of "portrait" and "landscape" used so effectively in Sociology as an Art Form. Both authors explicate and interpret the great themes of society, and in so doing, give shape to this field we call sociology.

It is my belief that the way we think is influenced by the texts and methods we use in our attempt to master the great themes of culture and society. We study these themes in an attempt to reconcile our personal view with the universal issues of the individual, order, freedom, and change.

I was greatly influenced by Nisbet, who uses the metaphor of "portrait" to discuss the role-types of the bourgeois, the worker, the bureaucrat, and the intellectual (and we might add the student, the faculty, the middle-manager, the politician, the patron.) He uses the metaphor of "landscape" to discuss the masses, power, the factory system and industrialization, progress, and the metropolis (and we might add the coordinating board, the system of higher education, state and federal government, etc.).

These are all major topics of study for sociologists, and for historians, anthropologists, and political scientists. So how does one's study of these themes as a sociologist influence one's role as a president? And how is it different from one whose professional preparation is in history, literature, political science, or psychology? All deal with the social and cultural landscape, and the great themes, but in different ways. Each strives to illuminate reality, and to find the truth. Some seek to find the universal in the concrete, others work with materials of the past, and still others concentrate on the individual as a person and not as a "role-type."

I agree with Clifford Geertz in his description of culture, which borrows from Max Weber. He writes "that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun...[that culture is] those webs, and the analysis of it...therefore [is] not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." By study we seek a way of seeing, of reducing the puzzle of social life, of finding not just details, but layers of meaning through observation, measurement, and explication. This is the process which Geertz refers to as "thick" description.

The President's Issues

It is with this background that I distinguish between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of structure," and relate thought to action. What are those "troubles" and "issues"? They relate to the campus as a community, equality, organization, relationships, reward systems, rituals, and group aspirations. And these relate to those overreaching themes of the individual, order, freedom, and change enumerated by Nisbet.

In particular, these "personal troubles of milieu," the portraits within the landscape, include students as both late adolescents and apprentices; faculty members as professionals balancing the demands of scholarship and teaching; and patrons as essential to campus progress but still external and a cause for concern among faculty.

The "public issues of structure," the landscape behind these portraits, include, for state-supported institutions, a political environment which seems to require crisis to compel decisions even as it pays for rational management; state coordinating boards which criticize campus leadership even as they hobble local independence; and, for all institutions, the tensions between the ideal of learning for its own sake and society's emphasis on credentials.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will repeat the questions with which I started. What does a college or university president do? How does his or her professional academic preparation influence how he does what he does? In my case, how does the "sociological imagination" become evident?

I think it has influenced my conception of the institution as both a campus and a college, at the margin and in the center; my concern for organizational structures which support individual aspirations; my attention to explication and interpretation as a means of illuminating reality, and my belief that effective communication requires an understanding of mutual expectations and context.

Does this mean that there are powerful benefits in having a president as sociologist as president? I dare not answer in any other way: it depends!

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